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THE CROW EATERS BY BAPSI SIDHWA : THE NARRATIVE OF PARSI MILIEU AND MORES

Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa, the historian and explorer of the Parsi community, is renowned as an exuberant creative writer. *The Crow Eaters (1978)* by Sidhwa is a delightful novel, an aide memoire of the Parsi community, its social and religious values, behavioural and cultural traits, traditions and customs. It is a fictitious saga of a Parsi family entwined with authentic traits of the Parsi community, and a recreation of Parsi milieu and mores with its ancient belief and creeds written by a Parsi author. *The Crow Eaters* is a boisterous portrayal of the characters of a particular

community, depicted with their nostalgic reminiscence. Though the characters in the novel are all fictional, the accumulated details make them appear life like. The novel is an authentic picture of the community which Sidhwa belongs to.

The paper is an endeavour to explore the Parsi milieus and mores.

***Key Words*:-** Milieu, migration, minority, patriarchal, loyalty

The Crow Eaters (1978) by Bapsi Sidhwa is the most delightful novel that is a humorous saga of the community to which the author herself belongs. The novel is amalgam of facts and fiction. Sidhwa, being a Parsi, has dealt exclusively with her community with its social milieu and mores. *The Crow Eaters* is a Parsi novel that deals with the customs, traditions, beliefs, superstitions and social behaviour of the Parsi community, it "purports to be a succinct and satirical account of the success story told to the youngsters in the later years by the Parsi Seth Faredoon Junglewalla himself . . . " *(Hashmi 136)* The title of the novel *The Crow Eaters* was considered highly derogatory by a section of the Parsi community that reckoned the novel an unfair portrayal of it, and an intrusion into the lives of the Parsi community. In an interview with David Montenegro, Sidhwa tells: "The book launch took place at an international hotel in Lahore. . . there was a bomb threat which subsequently I realized was from a Parsi who felt very strongly about the book. It took me some time to realize the turmoil the book had created within the community." *(33)*

Faredoon Junglewalla aka Freddy starts his journey for Lahore, leaving behind his ancestral village, with his pregnant wife Putli, his infant daughter, Hutoxi and his widowed mother-in-law.

Against the background of Faredoon's migration, Sidhwa traces the migration of Parsis from Persia. At the same time, the numerous adventures of Freddy represent the adventures of the Parsis while they were forced to wander as refugees before they at last landed at Diu. No sooner Faredoon comes to Lahore than he visits the four Parsi' families living there. Sidhwa sheds light on the distinctive feature of the Parsi community: "An endearing feature of this microscopic merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsis. Like one large close-knit family, they assisted each other, sharing success and rallying to support failure." *(CE 21)* Being extremely small in number and a sizeable minority community that was uprooted from its moorings, Parsis prefer to adjoin with each-other. Their hospitality is one of the most notable facets. Sidhwa writes about this unique trait of the Parsis: "Hospitality was accorded even to those Parsis who merely passed through the city. It did not matter if no one knew the travellers. *(CE 55)*

The Crow Eaters is an account of the Parsi customs and traditions, beliefs and superstitions, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments. In *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, R.K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia write: ". . . Bapsi Sidhwa is unique for focussing on the Parsis, their customs, rites, rituals, traditions, loyalties and mannerisms . . ." *(25)*Sidhwa depicts about *Jashan*, a religious thanks giving ceremony. *Jashan* is a commemoration of any occasion or event- a religious, seasonal or historical. Freddy offers *Jashan* prayer: **"**We owe Him . . . thanks for His grace . . . I will order a *jashan* of thanksgiving at our new home." (*CE 17)* Parsis like to maintain their identity by their traditional dresses. Sidhwa depicts about the traditional Parsi-costumes, *kustis* and *sudreh*. *Kustis* and *sudreh* are worn by the Parsis for the first time when their Navjote ceremony is performed. *Mathabana* is worn by Parsi-women to cover their hair "to fit like skull caps." (*CE 23)* Sidhwa writes about the Navjot ceremony which has a very special in Parsees' life. The Parsi

children are properly inducted into the religion through this ritual. After this ritual, Parsi Children can wear *sudreh* and *kustis* for the rest of his or her life.

Sidhwa delineates in detail the Parsi-rituals of marriage. She depicts about the *Mada-Sara* ceremony which takes place four days before the marriage of Billy and Tanya: “After the prospective bride and groom stepped off and planted the mango sapling that was to guarantee their fertility . . . The gummy-mouthed aunts and uncles . . . were also garlanded, stained with vermilion, and given small envelopes containing cash.” *(CE 218)* The Parsi-wedding ritual are conducted by two priests, standing before the groom and bride, chanting and throwing rice, coconut slivers, and rose petals at them:

> ‘And have you and your family with pure mind and truthful thoughts, words, and deeds, and for the increase of righteousness, agreed to give for ever and aye, this bride in marriage Behram?’ the priest asked the bride’s witness.
>
> Then the priest asked, ‘Have you desired to enter into this contract with pure mind and until death do ye part?’
>
> ‘I have so desired,’ answered Billy and Tanya in unison. *(CE 223-24)*

The issue of interfaith or outside marriage has been brought forth by Sidhwa. This is the issue that has haunted the souls of the Parsis because of their being a minuscule community at the verge of extinction. When Yazdi reveals his desire to marry an Anglo-Indian girl Rosy Watson, Freddy loses his temper: “You have the gall to tell me you want to marry an Anglo-Indian? Get out of my sight. Get out!” *(CE 123)*

Sidhwa highlights the significance of fire in the Parsi life. Fire is a sacred symbol of God for Parsis. It is kept burning. Sidhwa writes: “Fire, chosen by the Prophet as the outward symbol

of his faith, is venerated. It represents the Divine Light." *(CE 49)* When a servant is caught smoking *biri*, Jerbanoo calls Freddy to deal with the cardinal sin committed by the servant. Sidhwa writes: "Smoking, which is tantamount to defiling the holy symbol with spit, is strictly taboo – a sacrilegious sin. *(CE 49)*

Sidhwa describes about the 'Tower of Silence' and shows how Parsis dispose their dead ones. For the Parsis, 'Tower of Silence' means the last but the most important charity of one's life. Jerbanoo says: "Every Parsi is committed to feeding his last remains to the vultures. You may cheat them but not God!" *(CE 47)* Leaving the dead body for the feeding of vultures is an extreme form of Parsee-charity.

Sidhwa throws light on Parsis' superstitions and beliefs as well. In Parsi community, menstruating girls and women are considered impure and polluted as such they are treated as untouchables, made to spend the period in seclusion. Sidhwa reveals the patriarchal attitude with regards to the girl child. The lore of sex has been a taboo subject for girls long since. The patriarchal society denies girls to the access of essential knowledge of sex, and keeps an eye constantly guarding the girl child. Sidhwa writes: "Ever since babyhood Tanya had been safeguarded by a battery of nannies, sisters, and aunts, and by her mothers." *(CE 229)*

Sidhwa highlights the fact about Parsi loyalty. Parsis are believed to be faithful and loyal towards whosoever is ruling. After their migration to Gujarat, they were loyal to the king Jadav Rana. While in the British rule in India, they never missed an opportunity to show their loyalty towars the British regime. This sort of stand was merely to protect their small community and for the economic prosperity. Sidhwa writes: "Having thus paid homage to the British Empire, established his credentials and demonstrated his loyalty to 'Queen and Crown', Freddy was free

to face the future.” *(CE 22)* Freddy’s policy of loyalty towards the British pays off: “Freddy expanded his business . . . he dabbled in a variety of trades, deftly ‘buttering and marmalading’ *(CE 101)* During India’s fight for freedom against the British, Parsis remained neutral as a strategy of their survival.

Sidhwa has skilfully depicted the Parsi milieu in her novel *The Crow Eaters*. Freddy, as the representative of his generation’s Parsis, is a strict observer of the Parsi way of life, but he wears coat, pyjamas and turban when he has to attend parties or visit to the Government House. New generation of the Parsis are under the influence of the British way of life. In *The Fictional World of Bapsi Sidhwa*, Amit Kumar Dubey writes: “Faredoon represents a generation of Parsis going through a period of transition . . . *(47)* Jaydipsinh Dodiya remarks: “*The Crow Eaters* depict the Parsi life full of peculiar customs, traditions and rituals. Social behaviour and its consequent effect on their lives also come under Sidhwa’s scanner.” *(82)*

The Crow Eaters portrays Parsi-milieu and culture. Sidhwa throws enough light on the Parsee belief, conventions, customs, superstitions, loyalty etc. She brings forth the various cultural values and religious faith of her community. In *The Crow Eaters,* Sidhwa has given her community a voice. The novel moves around the Parsi life and its varied aspects. is a boisterous portrayal of the characters of a particular community, depicted with their nostalgic reminiscence. Though the characters in the novel are all fictional, the accumulated details make them appear life like. *The Crow Eaters* is a delightful novel, an aide memoire of the Parsi community, its social and religious values, behavioural and cultural traits, traditions and customs.

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